

Globalised Before Globalisation


By caravan, sea and on foot, Muslim traders spread wealth and faith throughout the world - from the Silk Road to the Sahara. Their good conduct and savvy business acumen helped create great societies. Their peaceful ways won people over. In an age of so-called "disaster capitalism" what is the role of Muslim business people in bringing good ethics and a spiritual consciousness back to what has become a dog-eat-dog world?

The Forgotten Legacy of the Muslim Trader

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**Habib Ali al-Jifri on:
'Globalised before Globalisation: The Forgotten History of the
Muslim Trader'**

Al-salām ‘alaykum wa rahmat Allah wa barakātuhu

[Opening du’ā]

Earlier today we were sitting with people who were interested in interfaith dialogue – Muslims and other religious groups – in a tent that was built like an Arabian tent within the precinct of a Church or religious centre that belonged to the Catholics in a predominantly Protestant country. After that we were taken to visit Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, after which we visited the House of Lords, and I was presented with a Qur’ān in the Prayer Room of the House of Lords. There are many indications in today’s trip.

I was told that many of the young people here work in finance and business. This mix and joining together of ideas between politics, arts and money would have once been difficult to see all of those things together in one day, but it’s in the secret of God’s creation of man. The Prophet of God (peace and blessings be upon him) was born an orphan; he was born and his father had already passed away, and then he lost his mother, followed by his grandfather who brought him up. During the period after losing his grandfather, he became a shepherd; he said he was never a Prophet, he was only a Shepherd.

When he was a young man he was hired by Seyyida Khadija to shepherd her wealth, look after her wealth. He went on a trade expedition with his uncle when he was about 12 or 13 years old that went from the *Hijaz* - Arabian Peninsula to the Levant. The Arabs of Qureysh used to have two annual trade journeys, one in the summer and one in winter, one heading to the north towards the Levant and one to Yemen. When he was a young man and used to take care of Seyyida Khadija’s finances, Maysira (who was sent with him to watch over her merchandise) noticed some things about the Prophet that he reported to Seyyida Khadija. There were three most salient things he noticed:

The first is something not normal for human beings to notice – he saw a cloud that shaded him from the sun wherever he went. He also noticed that whenever he sat under a tree to take shade, the branches would move over him to shade him further. The second thing he noticed was that the Prophet always did everything exactly when he was trading. The third thing he noticed was that he never lied or cheated once, even if there was an opportunity presented whereby he could cheat and make more money. These are the three foundational things that were spread at the hands of Muslim traders.

In a Prophetic tradition it is said that God loves those of you who, when doing something, they do it well. So He tied doing something well, with His love for you and I. There is a vast difference between someone who does something well in order to gain a reputation in the market place to sell his products, and someone else who does his work well to attain divine love. If one does his work well just for his reputation in the market place, he will have his standards set by what is in that market place; but the one that does well for the sake of Allah, then his standard will necessitate doing everything in his power to do his work well because Allah is the one looking at him and Allah knows the secrets within.

There was a Muslim craftsman who lived in the Levant and someone had commissioned him to do a piece for him, and when the man came to pay the craftsman, he really liked the work he had done. But the craftsman noticed something he himself didn't like – something in the detail that the man hadn't even looked at. He said to the man, *'Give me one more day and I'll do it even better,'* but the man said, *'I'm happy as it, it's even better than I expected.'* But the craftsman replied saying, *'No, either you take your money and go, or you leave it with me a day and I'll make it better.'* So the man left it with him and the next day he returned and it was better than before. The man asked the craftsman *'Why did you insist on keeping it for another day, if I was happy with it as it was?'* He said *'Because it was Allah who gave me that skill with which I did that work well, so I fear that if I do not do this work to the utmost of the skill that Allah has given me, Allah will strip me of this skill. Or at the very least I would be someone not giving the gratitude I should have.'*

The other thing Seyyida Khadīja's servant said about the Prophet, apart from that he did everything well and precisely, he would never cheat even if it would have made him more money. That directly correlates and relates to the spirit of the Muslim trader. As you know – and many of you know better than I do – that sometimes you are faced with a choice of *'do I keep my principles and make a little less in financial terms, or do I sell my principles to make money?'*

To hold onto principles and ethics while doing work well, are coupled together, and they become one crucible, or melting pot, out of the intention of doing it for Allah; they put an inherent strength within the trader, which makes him someone who possesses wealth and is not possessed by his own wealth. He then ascends to a rank that even the animals and plants and elements, have an experience of interacting with this person. We believe that everything in existence remembers God; there is nothing in existence that does not glorify His praise. When the trader is trading, but dealing with God in the way of worship, whereby his state is a state of glorification, then his state of glorification will reverberate with the entire state of the cosmos and there'll be harmony between the two states of glorification. But if it's just our tongues that glorify and not our states of being, then just as we do not understand that inanimate objects glorify God, inanimate objects do not understand how we glorify God either.

I don't want to prolong the theory, but this abstraction I'm talking about became real – it became something practical in our history. People who deal with money love the language of numbers. Two thirds of Muslims enter Islām without the sword. They entered Islam through men whose hearts were attached to divine presence. Most of the people who possessed those hearts, were traders such as yourselves – that's the South East of Asia, Indonesia, Singapore, South of India, the whole of East Africa, the centre of Africa, the West of Africa – the people in all of these places entered Islām at the hands of men who were traders. Most of the people in Egypt didn't become Muslim until 800 years after Islām entered Egypt. But Indonesia became majority Muslim after 400 years. What's the population of Indonesia? Approximately 270 million, and according to some statistics the Muslims make up 86% of the Muslim population. Some people think it's even more. The population was 3-5 million a few hundred years ago. If we were to go back to the 3-5 million populations, when Islām entered, how many people do you think they would have needed to propagate Islām and interact with the non-Muslims to spread Islām?

I heard a few moments ago during the introduction that there's 100,000 people working in Canary Wharf, and approximately 11,000 Muslims, is that right? So about 11% of the Canary Wharf Community are Muslim? Do you think it was about 11% of Muslims that entered Indonesia and brought Islām with them and convinced the people? What is 11% of 3 million? Let's let you answer, because we don't know numbers as well as you do [Audience laugh].

[An audience member says '330,000']

So do you think we would have needed 330,000 in Indonesia or more, to spread Islām? Come on Canary Wharf, tell us...[Audience laugh]. Really, how many people do you think? Give me something that's reasonable. 100,000? For spreading Islām to 3 million people? Someone is saying 1000. I ask this question because the reality of history teaches us that 9 people entered Indonesia and spread Islām. These nine are known by name, and even their graves. Eight out of those nine were traders.

How many people do you think convinced Bangladesh of Islām? What is the population of Bangladesh? The man who brought Islam to Bangladesh was Mawlāna Jalāl Al-dīn, with another man in another area.

East Africa – Islām came to that region with traders who brought the message of Islām and the same with West Africa. They were all working in trade. I don't know what power they had to convince people to come to this light because of them. It is directly related to the theory we spoke about in the beginning; they had principles, they had everything, they did well, they were people who remembered God and had good character when they dealt with people. The remembrance of God was in their hearts, but it was apparent on their faces in their dealings with people. There were people who remembered God with sincerity and honesty, and this appeared in the principles they kept and upheld in their characters, whilst doing their work well.

In today's time of globalisation, with its good and its bad, I think the role of Muslim trader or Muslim merchant can have good character, holding onto his principles, and his perfection of his work, and can be a guide to people through the globalisation we are living through right now. They can be a leader amidst this globalisation. But it requires certain things in the makeup of the Muslim trader. Some of the educators of souls used to say that the important thing isn't whether you have money or you don't have money, whether you renounce wealth or you don't renounce wealth; the important thing is where the money is to be found. Is it in your mind or in your heart? Because a man is a servant to whatever is in his heart. So whatever possesses your heart is your god. So if money starts filling your heart, then you become a slave to money.

The Prophet (saw) said *'Wretched is the slave of the dinar, wretched is the slave of the dirham.'* He is wretched and falls back on himself, and if he was pierced by a thorn he wouldn't have anything to pull the thorn out with. This is the end road for someone who is a slave to money. Whatever kind of happiness he lives will be turned to wretchedness and now matter how little he sins, he will have to fall. When he is confronted by problems, and problems confront everyone in their lives, it is very difficult for him to come out of his problem unscathed. But the one who has this

world in his hand, knows how to deal with it, he knows how to direct it, he possesses it and it doesn't possess him.

Someone was talking to us about the marketing strategy after the time of the nephew of Freud, who wanted to create a need for a commodity rather than people needing a commodity that exists. The theory was based on creating an elite for a commodity that people didn't even have before. I think this was the start of the problems we see in globalisation today, because it made the merchant change from being the servant of God on Earth - who wants to cultivate the Earth - to someone who corrupts the Earth and exploits the Earth.

This is where your role come in. You're in Europe, in Britain, in London, in a community of merchants and traders and business men – to be more exact – you're in the centre of commerce. There are conflicts within the world of commerce. How can you form through your connection to each other, on the basis of good moral character, on the basis of holding onto your principles, on the basis of you doing your work well, and on the principle of you doing your bit for the wider community – you are a community that can actually show another model of commerce at this time.

Just to finish off, I would like to ask you to do three things.

The first: your connection to the people around you: what's your intention behind those connections? Is it just to make money? Or pleasure? Or to pass the time? If that's it, then what's the difference between you and a non-Muslim? Ask yourself that. Think about your connection to the people around you. Is it based on you wanting good for them and mercy for them? Even if you differ with them, even if you end up differing with each other to the point that you start arguing – review your relations with people. It will make present in your mind when you're actually dealing with people, how the Prophet (saw) would have dealt with it in the same situation.

The second: your relations between each other. There are bases upon which people formulate relationships – be it religion, ethnicity, or coming from the same country, it could be nationalism, or just worldly interests, or because they like something about each other. But you're a Muslim, so your foundation with the relationship with the Muslims is, as God says, *'And help each other in goodness and consciousness of Allah (taqwā)'*

The third point: test yourself everyday when you're on your own, sit and think in the presence of God, of how you were that day in the market place. There are two markers for you to know your state with God: the first is the presence of your heart when you go to pray; ask yourself is your state when you go to pray before God, better this night or worse than before? Because it's an indicator of what your state was during that day.

The second is the state of your heart with the people around you. Do you increase in love or hatred or anger?

These two things are the basis for you actually putting the message out to the world, about the global message of Islām, during this age of globalisation. Once you have reviewed yourself on that night, it will impact on your behaviour at work the next day. Would you lie to people if you've reviewed yourself truthfully? Would you cheat?

Would you take the opportunity to make some quick money at the expense of someone else? These indications will show themselves to you during your work.

You have a huge responsibility. You need to study the life and biography of the Prophet (saw) and there are books about the traders that came before you, so you should read their biographies; how they opened hearts and countries.

[Closing du'ā]

About Habib Ali al-Jifri

Habib 'Ali Zain Al Abideen Al Jifri was born into a family of noble lineage extending in an unbroken chain to Imam Husayn (ra), the grandson of the Prophet (saw). Habib 'Ali is from the majestic city of Tarim, South Yemen. Nestled in the ancient valley of Hadramawt, Tarim has been a center of learning and spirituality for centuries. Habib 'Ali received a classical Islamic education from the illustrious scholars of Hadramawt, embodying a methodology which crystallizes the middle way of Islam, Islamic Jurisprudence, a respect for the differences between jurists and a spiritual education drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Habib 'Ali is Founder of the 'Taba Foundation for Islamic Studies and Research' based in the United Arab Emirates. He is also a lecturer at Dar Al Mustafa, Tarim, an educational institute established for the study of traditional Islamic sciences. Habib 'Ali is continually invited to lecture in many countries across the globe and appears regularly on a variety network television and radio programs.

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